

SECTION 1 (TITLE):

This act shall be known as the Veterans Bill of Rights.

SECTION 2 (PURPOSE):

To help veterans access jobs, college degrees, healthcare and housing by through proven, low-cost programs and law changes.

SECTION 3 (PROVISIONS):

(1) Increase veterans' access to jobs.

(a) Target micro-loans and technical assistance to veteran-owned businesses

(i) DEPARTMENT is hereby directed to target loans from the small business revolving loan fund to small business concerns owned and controlled by veterans and service-disabled veterans as defined at 15 U.S.C. § 632(Q)(2) and (3), with a goal of 7% of annual loaned funds reaching such businesses.

(b) Apply smart labor force data to direct veterans to in-demand fields

(i) DEPARTMENT is hereby directed to produce monthly electronic reports of workforce need projections, by industry, job type, geography, and needed credential; including to compare workforce needs with existing and projected workforce and credential availability in STATE; and highlight top in-demand industries, job types, and credentials by geographic area.

(ii) DEPARTMENT shall include in this report a mapping of which in-demand job titles and credentials would leverage skills, experience and credentials possessed by veterans; and forward the underlying data report and that additional information monthly to appropriate military out-placement offices, education centers, nonprofit programs and DEPARTMENTS working to connect veterans with jobs.

(2) Increase veterans' access to college degrees, certificates, and licenses.

(a) Ensure state licensing boards recognize veterans' military training and experience

(i) The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's Military Skills Test Waiver Program has allowed all fifty state licensing agencies the authority to waive the skills test portion of the CDL application for active-duty or recently separated veterans, who possess at least two years of safe driving experience operating a military truck or bus.

DEPARTMENT is hereby directed to take all necessary steps to annually increase the number of veterans taking advantage of this program, including ensuring information on the program is accessible on DEPARTMENT's homepage, coordinating with military placement and training programs, including the COOL program; and disseminating information on the program to veterans with relevant experience newly locating in STATE.

(ii) DEPARTMENT(s) licensing EMTs, paramedics, physician assistants and nurses in STATE shall immediately review all licensing practices and through regulation take all necessary and appropriate steps to increase recognition of military training and experience toward in-state licensing; DEPARTMENT shall report to the legislature within 365 days of passage of this act any additional steps that would require legislation and request that the legislature pass that legislation.

(iii) DEPARTMENT is hereby directed to review all state licenses for which military members may have relevant training or experience and, within 360 days of passage of this act, produce a report recommending steps that can be taken to increase recognition of military training and experience toward in-state licensing. DEPARTMENT shall thereafter take as soon as practicable and no later than 365 days after issuance of the report, any steps identified in the report that can be taken without further legislation, and shall report to the legislature annually to request it enact any necessary legislation.

(b) Award college credit for related military experiences and training.

(i) Every veteran who enrolls as a student in good standing, at an institution within the state university system and community college system, shall upon application be granted academic credits without limitation towards his or her degree for completion of courses that were part of such veteran's military training or service if the completed courses meet the standards of the American Council on Education or its equivalent for the awarding of academic credits. No fee, tuition, or other charge shall be assessed against a veteran who qualifies for such credit pursuant to this section.

(ii) DEPARTMENT shall adopt such procedures as are necessary to fully implement the provisions of this section.

(c) Increase flexibility in course registration to reflect returning veterans' needs.

(i) At institutions within the state university system and community college system:

(1) Institutions that offer an early course registration period for any segment of the student population shall have a process in place to offer early course registration to students who are veterans or national guard members;

(2) A student who is called to active duty in the armed forces of the United States after having attended regularly for 13 or more weeks or having completed 85% of the term's work through acceleration shall be given full credit for each course in which he or she has a grade of C or better;

(3) Students called to active duty who do not meet attendance requirements sufficient to earn a grade shall be entitled to a 100% refund of tuition and fees;

(4) Veterans with no previous college experience shall be permitted to file applications up to the end of registration, and allowed to begin classes pending completion of their application and provision of supporting documents;

(5) Upon their return from active duty, veterans may register even after normal registration periods end, without late fees or other penalties.

(d) Expand proven, cost-effective training programs that leverage veterans' experiences

(i) DEPARTMENT shall annually review apprentice, training and other vocational programs focused on providing job training and placement to returning military servicemembers and veterans. Such annual review shall evaluate the costs and results and recommend programs for expansion with state funding, including to estimate future returns to the state of improved outcomes from program expansion.

(ii) DEPARTMENT shall provide an annual report to the legislature and Governor on January 1 of each year for five years after the passage of this act, to be used to inform annual budget decisions.

(3) Increase veterans' access to healthcare.

(a) Ensure all veterans can access the healthcare coverage and treatment they are eligible for based on their service.

(i) DEPARTMENT is hereby directed to develop and operate veteran health navigator services to increase access to healthcare coverage and services.

(1) DEPARTMENT shall identify, train and deploy veteran health navigators who have direct knowledge of the veteran communities they serve.

(2) Veteran health navigators shall help identify all federal and other health benefits, coverage, and services available to veterans and their families.

(3) Veteran health navigators shall coordinate with relevant departments, health care providers, and health insurance programs to help veterans and their beneficiaries apply for coverage under such programs, including helping veterans overcome barriers within the health care system to ensure enrollment in health plans and effective delivery and coordination of health services.

(4) Such activities should leverage existing resources and structures where veterans and their families are likely to be found.

(b) Ensure the needs of veterans and their families are incorporated in all efforts to expand access to affordable, quality healthcare.

(i) Using the veteran health navigators and program described in (3)(a) above as a source of information about the unique needs, coverage and treatment gaps faced by veterans and their families, DEPARTMENT shall examine all existing programs designed to increase access to affordable quality healthcare, to evaluate whether the needs of veterans and their families are met by those programs or whether further coordination with the veteran health navigators or other steps would better meet the needs of veterans and their families;

(ii) DEPARTMENT shall execute any steps identified in (i) above and produce a report of its findings, recommendations and any additional legislative or budget action it recommends; and shall deliver that report to the Legislature and Governor in STATE and release it to the news media;

(iii) In states that have not expanded Medicaid, DEPARTMENT shall prepare a report showing the impacts that Medicaid expansion would have for the community of veterans and their families in STATE and shall deliver that report to the Legislature and Governor in STATE and release it to the news media;

(iv) In states that have expanded Medicaid, DEPARTMENT shall prepare a report showing the impacts that Medicaid expansion have had to date for the community of veterans and their families in STATE, and shall include any recommendations for better including or serving veterans and their families in that expansion; and shall deliver that report to the Legislature and Governor in STATE and release it to the news media.

(4) Prevent veteran suicide and increase veterans' access to mental health services.

(a) Ensure veterans and their families have access to mental health treatment, including for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide and suicidal ideation.

(i) Ensure access to mental health coverage, services and treatment is included as a full focus stream of the veteran health navigator program described in (3)(a) above, and that

navigators help identify all federal and other mental health benefits, coverage, and services available to veterans and their families, including for post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression, and suicide prevention.

(ii) In coordination with local, state, and federal government agencies, and in consultation with nonprofits, service providers including Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, localities, and cities that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental health, DEPARTMENT shall develop and implement a strategy to reduce barriers to access to mental health services and treatment for veterans and their families, including by:

- (1) Identifying structural and logistical barriers to accessing treatment, including perceived stigma, long travel distances to receive care, and any other barriers, and making an annual report on such barriers available to the Legislature, Governor and on their website;
- (2) Resolving all barriers identified in (1) that can be resolved without legislative or budgetary action, including through increased coordination between departments, non-profit providers and the federal government, application for and use of private and federal grants, and other actions; and
- (3) Report annually to the the Legislature, Governor and on DEPARTMENT's website of additional legislative or budgetary steps that would resolve barriers identified in (1) that have not been resolved by the steps taken in (2).

(iii) In coordination with local, state, and federal government agencies, and in consultation with nonprofits, service providers including Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, localities, and cities that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental health, DEPARTMENT shall enhance and strenghten suicide prevention programs in keeping with proven best practices and research, including by:

- (1) Identifying and applying for federal and private grants focused on veteran suicide prevention;
- (2) Coordinating local, state, federal, and nonprofit programs that include community-based approaches for at-risk veterans and veterans at large;
- (3) Providing technical assistance to communities to develop strategic plans to reduce veteran suicide, including through coordination and participation by local leaders, faith communities, schools, workplaces, and other stakeholders; and
- (4) Evaluating community strategic plans within STATE and disseminating learnings and best practices to optimize the impact of efforts by all partners and stakeholders.

(b) Connect veterans to trained mental health care providers, including those trained in veteran suicide prevention.

(i) DEPARTMENT shall create a centralized provider database, identifying by region mental health providers with expertise and ability to assist veterans and their families, including to highlight providers with training or experience in the prevention and treatment of veteran suicide.

(ii) Using existing resources, and incorporating best practices and research from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and state and nonprofit services providers in STATE, DEPARTMENT shall develop a continuing education course for mental health providers in STATE to obtain expertise in veteran suicide assessment, prevention,

treatment and risk management and make that program available for free to providers in regions of the state identified in (i) above as lacking sufficient trained providers.

(iii) From existing or appropriated resources, DEPARTMENT shall identify evidence-based best practices to increase awareness of any veteran suicide prevention hot line in STATE or nationally, and other crisis resources with proven effectiveness to reduce veteran suicide.

(5) End veteran homelessness.

(a) Set and achieve a goal of ending veteran homelessness in three years

(i) "Ending veteran homelessness" shall be defined in accordance with the criteria most recently released by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.

(ii) In coordination with local, state, and federal government agencies and nonprofits, and in consultation with states and cities that have achieved and end to veteran homelessness in accordance with the above criteria, DEPARTMENT shall develop and implement a strategy to meet that goal within three years, including through:

(1) Coordinated community outreach and a common assessment tool;

(2) A community-wide comprehensive, by-name list of veterans experiencing homelessness, prioritized based on vulnerability;

(3) Data-sharing among all relevant providers, DEPARTMENTS, and Veterans Affairs Medical Centers;

(4) Increased coordination and streamlined processes for appropriate housing placements;

(5) Connecting veterans experiencing homelessness to health, mental health, employment and training resources through the services described in this Act;

(6) A commitment to Housing First principles; and

(7) Identification of and application for funding, as needed from private, foundation, and other partners.